



# FIRST PRIORITY ACT

## HB 338

Georgia's Strategic and Evidence-Based  
Strategy to Transform Low-Performing Schools



## The First Priority Act: Georgia's Strategic and Evidence-Based Approach to Transform Low-Performing Schools

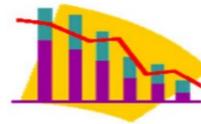
The Chief Turnaround Officer position was created to develop and effectively execute an evidence-based model to implement the First Priority Act (HB 338). This legislation is a component of Georgia's multi-faceted approach to decreasing the number of low-performing schools statewide. With the adoption of the First Priority Act, the state's commitment to improving outcomes for *all* students now includes:

- School Choice Initiatives
- District and School Flexibility Opportunities
- The First Priority Act

The First Priority Act embeds four decisive expectations that undergird a comprehensive model to effectively implement the legislation:

- Develop partnerships with schools and district stakeholders
- Provide an additional tier of academic and non-academic support to improve outcomes at targeted schools
- Promote cohesiveness and collaboration across agencies and organizations
- Share and promote innovative/best practices to impact schools statewide

The latter expectation underscores how innovative solutions that take place in a set of targeted schools can impact practices in schools and districts across Georgia. More specifically, the Chief Turnaround Office, functioning as an innovation incubator, injects a *design thinking* mindset to promote change, creativity, and transformation. As prototypes are tested and proven successful, such innovations can be scaled to inform the state's broader approach to addressing student outcomes. This methodology ensures that investments provide a positive return before larger scale implementation.



**“Every organization is perfectly designed to get the results it achieves.”**

--W. Edwards Deming

***Is your school “designed” to the specifications of the old or the new paradigm?***

As W. Edwards Deming noted, organizations are perfectly designed to get the results they get.<sup>1</sup> Significantly improved (different) results are likely only possible with a shift in how the organization functions. This shift is a foundational paradigm of the First Priority Act.

### THEORY OF ACTION

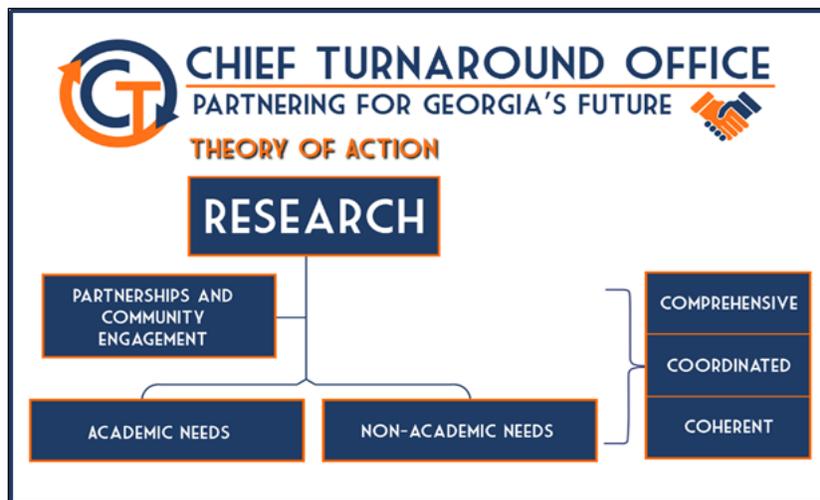
The First Priority Act is undergirded by the moral imperative to ensure all children receive a quality education. This is only possible by addressing the complex and multi-layered academic and non-academic root causes. The Chief Turnaround Office uses an evidenced-based framework informed by the most successful turnaround program in the country.<sup>2</sup> The strategy, contextualized for Georgia, is being guided by the following propositions:

- If we use evidence-based practices, research, and data; and
- If we create partnerships with schools and district stakeholders; and
- If we address academic and non-academic needs; and
- If we are comprehensive, coordinated, and coherent in our efforts...

**WE WILL SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE OUTCOMES IN TARGETED SCHOOLS. AND, IF WE LEVERAGE THE LEARNING AND INNOVATION FROM THIS EFFORT, WE WILL IMPROVE OUTCOMES THROUGHOUT GEORGIA.**

<sup>1</sup> Famous quote and concept attributed to W. Edwards Deming. Often used in change leadership and transformation efforts. Retrieved from: [http://quotes.deming.org/authors/W.\\_Edwards\\_Deming/quote/10141](http://quotes.deming.org/authors/W._Edwards_Deming/quote/10141)

<sup>2</sup> Rand Corporation. Retrieved from: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1550-3.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550-3.html)



**Partnerships & Community Engagement** – The complexity of transformation is too difficult to address alone or in silos. There are a myriad of state agencies and organizations that have identified addressing low-performing schools or at-risk students and families as a focus. Research leaders on school turnaround argue that successful turnaround efforts are characterized by a coherent district and state strategy.<sup>3</sup> To enhance coordination and coherence, a proposal has been made to create the Georgia Turnaround Collaborative. This team, with representatives from over a dozen state agencies and non-profit organizations, will be tasked with increasing alignment of efforts – generating *collective impact* related to academic and non-academic barriers.

**Address Academic Needs** – Ultimately, the deliverable most easily measured to represent success is increased academic performance. Therefore, the theory of action embeds a comprehensive approach to addressing the practices and conditions that will directly address students’ academic needs.<sup>4</sup> These conditions are framed through four levers:

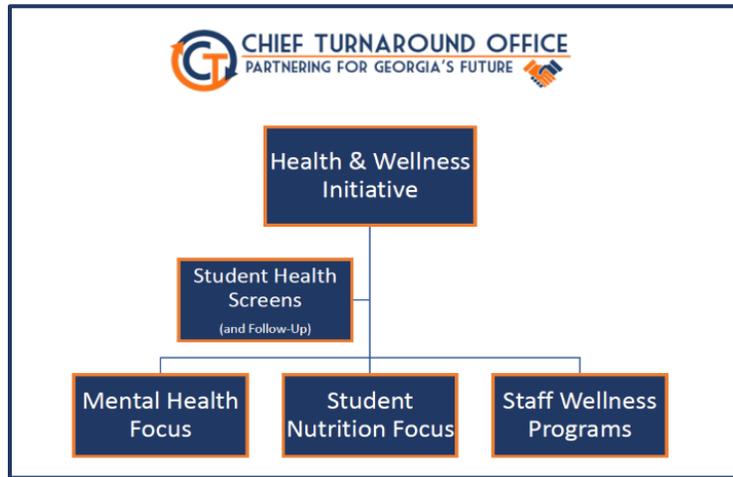
- **Leadership**
  - ✓ *Will to do what is necessary.*
  - ✓ *Capacity.*
  - ✓ *Positive learning climate & culture.*
- **Talent Management**
  - ✓ *School leadership selection and development.*
  - ✓ *Teacher talent management: Recruitment and Retention.*
  - ✓ *Teacher talent management: Strategic Professional Development.*
- **Instructional Infrastructure**
  - ✓ *Curriculum strategy.*
  - ✓ *Instructional monitoring and support.*
  - ✓ *Progress monitoring.*
  - ✓ *Data culture and system.*
- **District Support & Accountability**
  - ✓ *School accountability.*
  - ✓ *School support.*
  - ✓ *Defined authority.*



<sup>3</sup> The Council of the Great City Schools at <http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/SIG%20Report%202015.pdf>; West Ed at <https://www.wested.org/resources/state-role-in-school-turnaround/>

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix. Adapted from the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program.

**Address Non-Academic Needs** – The authors of the First Priority Act and the state’s ESSA Plan acknowledged the importance of addressing the whole-child, and not simply the *classroom student*. The delicate balance of prioritizing academic and non-academic barriers is a cornerstone of Georgia’s innovative strategy. The Chief Turnaround Office’s Health & Wellness Initiative is a data-driven and evidence-based approach to support students’ non-academic needs related to health and wellness.



Based on data from schools’ local communities and Georgia more broadly, seven health related barriers were identified. These areas are strategically addressed – with a more comprehensive focus on mental/behavioral health and student nutrition.

- Asthma
- Hearing
- Language & Communication
- Mental/Behavioral Health
- Nutrition
- Oral Health
- Vision

Also note the Health & Wellness Initiative provides a *staff wellness* component. This component supports broader transformation efforts related to school culture and talent management. A positive school culture promotes student learning, and it is a factor in recruiting and retaining effective teachers.<sup>5</sup>

### The Role of the District

Often, research has accentuated the building principal’s leadership as the critical change lever. This research contends that the quality of the school leader is the most critical factor in turning around a school.<sup>6</sup> Few will debate the necessity of an effective school leader. However, since there remain thousands of low-performing schools, relying *solely* on superhero principals has not proved to be a large scale and sustainable model for transforming schools.

Instead, the research promotes that school turnaround – and sustainability of any improvement, is much more complex and comprehensive. One essential component is the role of the district. Research firmly stresses the district’s role in school transformation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Learning Policy Institute at [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher\\_Turnover\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher_Turnover_REPORT.pdf); Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools at <https://sel.cse.edu/school-climate-is-key-to-teacher-retention-student-achievement/>

<sup>6</sup> Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Leithwood & Strauss, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Hoenig, 2010; Kirtman and Fullan, 2016; Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2009; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano And Waters, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2013; Zavadsky, 2012.

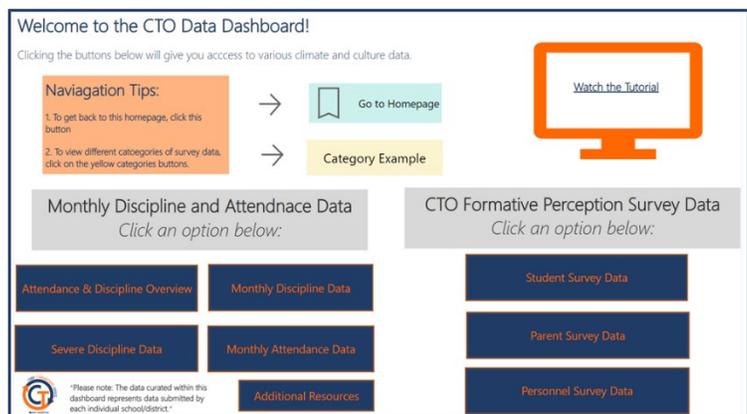
The Council of the Great City Schools studied the impact of school improvement grants that were given directly to individual schools.<sup>8</sup> Their findings stressed, a subset of SIG recipients showed concrete, quantifiable signs of genuinely “turning around.” The Council identified five common themes associated with these schools:

- A coherent district and state strategy for supporting turnaround
- Strategic approach to sustainability
- Principal capacity building
- Emphasis on instructional improvement
- Leveraged data

Simply stated, the research argues that schools cannot turn themselves around alone. Instead, the district plays a critical role in ensuring the necessary *district conditions* are in place for school-level transformation. When these conditions are in place, the district and the school can partner to co-create and innovate for school-level success. To strengthen district engagement, the Chief Turnaround Office provided mid-year feedback to district leaders on the district conditions each district identified as priorities.

### Data Driven: Monitoring Progress with Leading Indicators

Despite the drive toward immediate academic gains, research argues that dramatic academic improvement is most often preceded by positive leading indicators.<sup>9</sup> The Chief Turnaround Office uses a customized data dashboard to monitor 11 leading indicators throughout the year. These formative metrics provide real-time data to monitor progress, inform adjustments, and to reallocate resources. Along with quantitative metrics, principals and their supervisors receive a weekly report that provides qualitative feedback on progress. District Superintendents and School Board Presidents receive a monthly report that includes both qualitative and quantitative data.



The regular feedback to the district, and their expected response to that data, highlights the important role the district must play to ensure school transformation. The Chief Turnaround Office promotes a *partnership* relationship between the school and district. This allows improvement efforts to be co-created and co-owned.

<b>Leading Indicators</b>	
Interim/Benchmark Assessment Results	Student Discipline
Monthly & Weekly Progress Summaries	Student Climate & Culture Surveys
Parent Surveys	Teacher Attendance
Progress on District Conditions	Teacher Recruitment & Retention
Stakeholder Engagement/Support	Staff Climate & Culture Surveys
Student Attendance	

<sup>8</sup> The Council of the Great City Schools at <http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/SIG%20Report%202015.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> De’ la Torre et al., 2013; Leithwood & Strauss, 2010; May & Sanders, 2013.

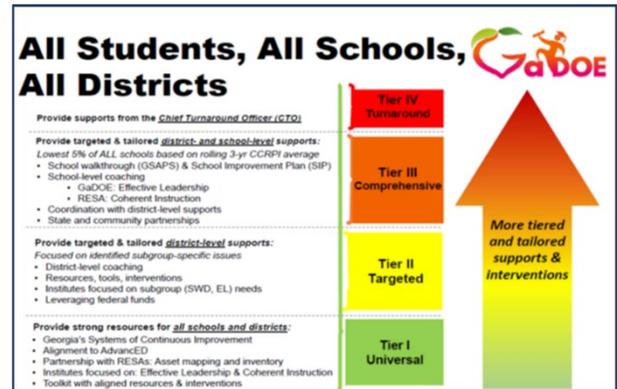
## Summary

The First Priority Act (HB338) was passed into law during the 2017 Legislative Session. The state's first Chief Turnaround Officer, Dr. Eric Thomas, was hired that fall and immediately engaged with stakeholders across Georgia. Based on ongoing conversations, it was clear the residue of the proposed Opportunity School District remained worrisome to many. The First Priority Act, and its partnership approach, has replaced the controversial takeover conversation associated with the Opportunity School District.

Added to the efforts over the past 25 years, the First Priority Act is now an additional tool supporting Georgia's efforts and commitment to improve educational outcomes for all students:

- School Choice Initiatives
- District and School Flexibility Opportunities
- The First Priority Act

The First Priority Act and the Chief Turnaround Office is embedded into Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan. The plan calls for a multi-tiered support model as noted to the right. The model provides an additional tier of support and intervention for a set of target schools. The greatest opportunity and return on investment from the First Priority Act come from leveraging the Turnaround Office as an innovation incubator. This design thinking mindset promotes change, creativity, and transformation. As prototypes are tested and proven successful, such innovations can be scaled more broadly. Ultimately, the First Priority Act, if championed and executed with fidelity, provides Georgia with a third strategy to reduce the number of low-performing schools in the state – ensuring Georgia's best is yet to come.



### Tier IV Supports (as of January 2019)

<p><b>Evidenced-Based Turnaround Model</b></p> <p><b>External Needs Assessment</b></p> <p><b>School-Developed 90-Day Plan (Four Priorities)</b></p> <p><b>Transformation Team</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Transformation Specialist (Team Lead)</li> <li>✓ Communities in Schools Coordinator</li> <li>✓ ELA &amp; Math Content Support (RESA)</li> <li>✓ Literacy Specialist (Elementary Schools)</li> <li>✓ PBIS Specialist (RESA)</li> </ul> <p><b>Climate &amp; Culture Focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ PBIS Technical Support</li> <li>✓ Weekly &amp; Monthly Data Monitoring via CTO Data Dash Board</li> <li>✓ Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) Program</li> <li>✓ Character Education/Soft Skills Programming (Rural Schools)</li> </ul> <p><b>Partnerships &amp; Stakeholder Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Educational Turnaround Advisory Council</li> <li>✓ Georgia Turnaround Collaborative (Pending)</li> <li>✓ Platinum Partners</li> <li>✓ Family Engagement Initiative</li> <li>✓ CEO Friend for Principal</li> </ul>	<p><b>Health &amp; Wellness Initiative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Health &amp; Wellness Advisory Team</li> <li>✓ Student Health Screens</li> <li>✓ Behavioral/Mental Health and Nutrition</li> </ul> <p><b>Talent Management Focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Recruitment &amp; Retention Stipends (Pending)</li> <li>✓ Teacher Recruitment via Woodrow Wilson Foundation</li> <li>✓ Rural Teacher Recruitment/Retention</li> <li>✓ Staff Wellness</li> </ul> <p><b>Leadership Focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Behavior Event Interviews (BEI) for Principals</li> <li>✓ School-Level Capacity Building:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Principals and Assistant Principals</li> <li>○ Teacher Leaders</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ District-Level Capacity Building:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Principal Supervisors</li> <li>○ Curriculum and Instruction Leaders</li> <li>○ School Board</li> <li>○ Superintendent</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Instructional Infrastructure Focus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Curriculum Resources (Pending)</li> <li>✓ Instructional Support</li> <li>✓ Data Usage and Interventions</li> <li>✓ Formative Assessment Resources (Pending)</li> </ul>
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## APPENDIX



### THE DISTRICT CONDITIONS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL TURNAROUND

#### Leadership Lever

- **Will to do what is necessary.** Senior district leaders and the school board promote bold changes to ensure all students are successful. District leaders engage all stakeholders in the effort.
- **Capacity.** The district has the human capital bandwidth and is prioritizing resources to orchestrate transformation – with urgency.
- **Positive learning climate & culture.** The district provides guidance and direction to ensure that school leaders create a positive learning climate and culture for students and staff. Structures to promote teacher voice, collegiality, and shared decision-making are reinforced.

#### Talent Management

- **School leadership selection and development.** District leadership implements intentional, rigorous, and prioritized hiring of school leaders for at-risk schools. Leadership competencies and other assessment measures are used to identify leadership gaps and development areas.
- **Teacher talent management: Recruitment and retention.** District leadership establishes conditions to increase the number and impact of highly effective teachers in high-priority schools through recruitment, placement, and retention.
- **Teacher talent management: Strategic Professional Development.** District leadership develops teachers in high-priority schools, leveraging various data to identify improvement areas, and then increasingly holds them accountable for instructional performance.

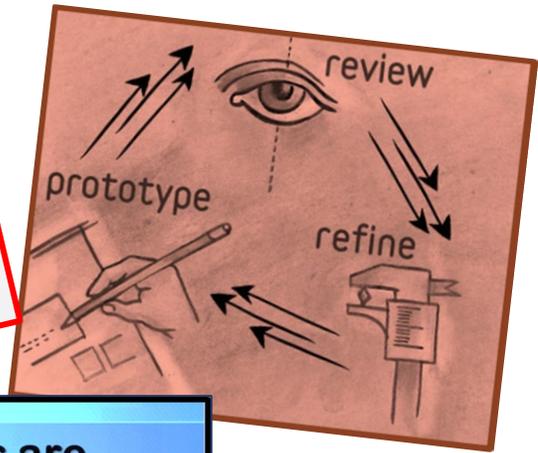
#### Instructional Infrastructure

- **Curriculum strategy.** District leadership provides a clear, coherent and quality curriculum that 1) guides teachers during weekly collaboration meetings, 2) supports alignment of lesson plans to the rigor of the standards, and 3) helps build teacher understanding of each standard.
- **Instructional monitoring and support.** District leadership establishes practices and systems to ensure high-quality instruction (core and interventions) that are aligned with curriculum and assessments in all classrooms.
- **Progress monitoring.** District leadership ensures a purposeful assessment strategy, with interims or benchmarks clearly aligned to standards that serve as foundational tools to monitor progress.
- **Data culture and system.** District leadership establishes a data-driven culture. This culture is evidenced by 1) leveraging a data management system, 2) prioritization and decision-making based on data, 3) distinguishing gaps of targeted sub-groups, and 4) addressing individual student's needs.

#### District Support & Accountability

- **School accountability.** District leadership has an effective structure to hold principals, school leadership teams, and itself accountable for high, specific expectations.
- **School support.** District leadership supports schools by providing strategic and tailored resource utilization, rapid response to key needs and regular, purposeful school presence. Support is provided to address academic and non-academic priorities.
- **Defined authority.** District provides principals with defined authority to drive change in their schools. This authority is anchored on a vision to ensure all students receive a quality education.

*Adapted from the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program.*



**"All organizations are perfectly designed to get the results they get. To get better results, you need to improve the design of the organization"**



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